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Coastal Commission approves streamlined permitting process to manage vegetation

Unanimous vote certifies public works

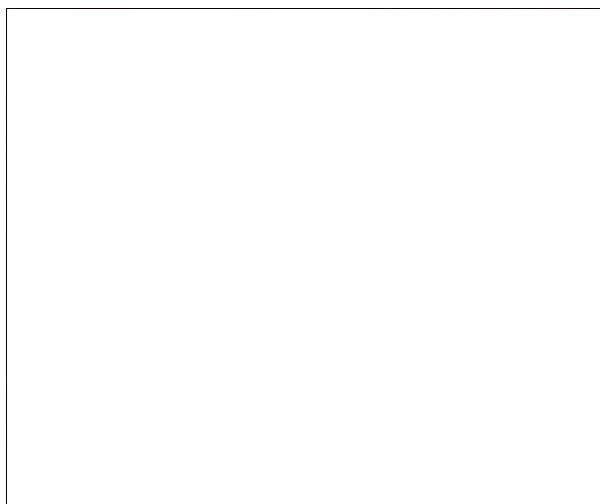
By Sarah Wright
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The California Coastal Commission gave the green light on a new permitting mechanism for vegetation management projects last week, paving the way for work to begin on a 44-acre project in Butano this summer.

The Forest Health and Fire Resilience Public Works Plan, developed by the Resource Conservation Districts in San Mateo and Santa Cruz counties, was approved unanimously on Thursday, but not before a lengthy conversation with statewide leaders and members of the public.

That’s because these two public works plans, although only applicable to the two neighboring counties, could have widespread effects on the state’s strategy to tackle wildfire prevention.

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The new PWP process means that any vegetation management project that meets the standards outlined in the plan can go straight to the Coastal Commission for approval, waiving the normal Coastal Development Permit process and associated fees. That could make a lengthy process much shorter and much more feasible.

But not everyone agrees that the new plan is the best way to streamline the process. Each local RCD would have to dedicate staff time and resources to developing its own document.

“We do not support the PWP process as a statewide solution,” said Matthew Reischman, deputy assistant director at Cal Fire.

He’d rather see the state utilize the existing California Vegetation Treatment Program as the framework for faster approval of vegetation management projects. Jessica Morse, deputy secretary for forest resources management at the state’s Natural Resources Agency, agreed, while also applauding the local RCDs for their innovative work. She’d like to model a new program off of one offered by the California State Water Resources Control Board. But Morse still urged the commission to approve the PWP while the conversation continues.

“That gets us to a solution now, and wildfires are not going to wait for our processes,” Morse said.

Many speakers at Thursday’s meeting challenged the idea that forest management strategies like those outlined in the PWP are even effective, and would rather see a focus on home hardening and other defensible space measures. Another concern was that the PWP process, pioneered by the two local districts, isn’t replicable by every other coastal RCD statewide.

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But the bigger worry for Coastal Commission members was their own staff’s capacity to process what they expect to be an influx of projects for approval through the new process. Commissioner Katie Rice encouraged the commission staff to keep working

with various local and state agencies to find the best solution and to use the work behind the PWP as a launching pad for future innovation.

“I would hate to see the commission be a barrier,” Rice said. “I want to see us as a facilitator.”

Sarah Wright

Sarah Wright is the deputy editor for the Review. She reports on unincorporated San Mateo County and local schools. She holds a bachelor’s degree in Foreign Service from Georgetown University and has worked in policy and communications in Washington, D.C.